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AUTHOR Osborn, Frances P.
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ABSTRACT

Monroe Community College (MCC) has been involved in strategic planning over the last 4 years. The following lessons have been drawn from these 4 years of experience: (1) all plans need to be seen as temporary; (2) no plan drawn up in the planner's office could be implemented if it ignored the fleeting, ambiguous nature of the college's and community's political systems, personnel changes, special interest groups, idiosyncrasies, and traditions; (3) a dynamic, changing institution resists balance and order, and plans should always be somewhat behind, if planning is working; and (4) the goal of planning is to go beyond plans and create an environment that enables the organization to spot and solve its own problems. The effects of MCC's involvement with strategic planning can be seen in some of the college's accomplishments that required innovative problem solving, the easing of rigid structures and new ways of seeing. These included the development of a venture capital fund, which provided $450,000 to be used for high risk ideas that needed a quick start with a minimum of red tape; the creation of a stand-alone, entrepreneurial unit with flexibility in delivery systems, rewards, and fiscal procedures; and the hiring of an advertising agency to assist in addressing the proper market segments and projecting a favorable college image. (RO)

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DOES YOUR PLANNING COMMUNICATE ACTION?

OR,

IS YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN A COFFEE TABLE BOOK?

by

Frances P. Osborn
Associate Vice President
Monroe Community College
Rochester, New York

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DOES YOUR PLANNING COMMUNICATE ACTION?
Or,
IS YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN A COFFEE TABLE BOOK?

Is your strategic plan a coffee table book--beautiful but untouched, unread, unheeded?

Strategic planning, a concept that originated in the military, was borrowed by business and is now currently being attempted by higher education, may need a closer look before it is effective for community colleges.

At Monroe Community College we've been involved in strategic planning for four years, and early this year received reaffirmation of accreditation from Middle States Association for our planning efforts.

What have we learned? We've learned that a plan and planning are not the same, any more than they're the same part of speech. The value is in the latter, not the former; one implies action, the other historical record. To create a plan is comparatively easy; it's the actions required by planning that are difficult, for they require simplifying and stripping away obstacles that hinder--even whittling away at the plan itself.

Sometimes we have borrowed the facade of strategic

planning--the explanatory charts, graphs, committees, and vocabulary--but not found the soul. As planners, we tend to design for each other, not our institutions. We sit in our offices, drawing planning diagrams so stunning in their complexity they bring admiring gasps from colleagues. We print them in multi-colored inks on high-quality paper, bind them in slick covers, and distribute them to administrators. We conclude, at this point, our work is done; our communication complete. What more could be expected of us?

Alas, the beautiful, carefully-bound strategic plans lie on the top shelf of each administrator's office, much like the superbly crafted $120.00 book on the coffee table in our living room at home. The coffee-table book remains there, much admired by members of the publishing industry for its workmanship and design, but untouched by our visitors, our family, maybe even ourselves.

The truth is, we planners like to be architects. It's the design aspect that pleases us. We like to conceive of the ideal and imbue it with a touch of class. It's only after our architectural design is complete that we check to see if the proper steel exists to bear the stress of the structure. This may be why someone has defined strategic planning as "going backward forwards."

The danger lies in our love of detail. As we refine procedures for accomplishing our goals, we address every

possible contingency--and end up with an elaborate structure, and a 4"-thick procedures manual to accompany it. It's tempting to hide behind detail; detail forestalls having to do anything, because any idea that has wended its way through the maze has been rendered so innocuous as to be useless. Either that, or it has been referred back to a committee for another year's study.

Henry David Thoreau in speaking of the American government, had a comment that applies to this kind of detailed planning: "what is it but a tradition...endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man..."

Our plans, even those that call for flexibility and timeliness, frequently serve instead as the greatest obstacle, for they stifle rather than encourage vitality and force. They leave no room for the educated intuition that characterizes action-oriented individuals. There's form in the plan, but not soul. "The letter killeth, but the spirit makes it live." It's easy for plans that do not have spirit to be ignored; they lack the force and vitality of Thoreau's "living man." There's not a person, not even a pronoun, to be found anywhere in them.

We need, then, to take the emphasis away from rigid structures with inviolate deadlines and timelines. One more

observation of Thoreau's applies, "This never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way."

At MCC we began to see that we had to get the rigidity of our plans out of the way to get things done. We began to consider all plans as temporary, to be rendered in pencil, with large erasers handy to constantly make changes. Pencils and erasers became a permanent part of each planner's office equipment. We realized there never could be a permanent plan, unless it was a historical document that described what we did last year.

At first we were embarrassed because our planning charts were so ragged and messy, while those of other colleges were neat and balanced. Our first attempt at a plan produced a complicated zodiacal chart that was incomprehensible. The next five, while simpler, were protean efforts to fit our work into charts obtained from a workshop I attended on strategic planning. In the meantime, the College's planning was continuing; results were gratifying, but in no way did a chart reflect what was going on. We were getting a little desperate; the Middle States team was coming and would expect clear charts.

But, we wanted to reflect the temperament of our college and its community. We began to understand that no plan drawn up in the planner's office could be implemented if it ignored

the fleeting, ambiguous nature of the college's and community's political systems; personnel changes; special interest groups; idiosyncrasies, and traditions.

We learned there are not enough boxes and arrows on any planner's charts to tuck in all the loose ends and unmatched parts. A dynamic, changing institution resists balance and order. Plans, charts, and procedures have to rush to keep up, and should always be somewhat behind, if planning is working.

Our aim as planners, we've now learned, is to go beyond the plans and create an environment that enables the organization to spot and solve its own problems. We wanted to encourage an entrepreneurial attitude, one that allows risk and innovation and change and that encourages people to assume authority and accept responsibility for their choices.

These are not qualities associated with academia, but they exist, perhaps more frequently than we realize. Notice how many faculty and staff are applying their skills in entrepreneurial ways outside their academic assignments. They're highly paid consultants, run small businesses, write successful textbooks, are inventors and corporate partners. But, they've been forced to step outside the college to use their talents in imaginative ways because we've not created the climate that can utilize their entrepreneurial ability,

ability that we now very much need.

Most long-term successes are accomplished in small increments of resolving troubled areas. But when people plan, they tend to think in grandiose terms and sketch broad leaps. Creating an environment that makes people aware of needed changes and encourages entrepreneurial attitudes is not easy to portray on charts and graphs; it's too atmospheric. Besides, it requires removing obstacles and barriers, stripping away layers, pencilling out red tape instead of adding to it, erasing boxes and arrows on charts.

To encourage an entrepreneurial bent we need to identify our capabilities, nourish their development and build on them, in order to seek opportunistic improvements in a dynamic environment. We need to use our boxes and arrows not to confine but to teach people how to get around the procedures and barriers, so they can work their way through bureaucratic mazes.

Planning has to reflect the ambiguity of life. To plan is to "see through a glass darkly." There are not clear results and paths to get there. One reason elaborate plans and strictly adhered to procedures are so comforting is they portray life as knowable, understandable, and controllable. And that is why no college's paper plans describe what is really going on in planning, any more than an organizational chart tells you who has power in the college. Both describe

compliance in form but not in function.

Although we like to think decisions in academia are based on a rational, careful weighing of options, the truth is decisions are most often the results of "bargains," or temporary solutions that resulted from interacting positions of power or special interest groups. Often the result is not what is planned but an unintended by-product.

To plan is to enter the world of political action, where motives are not as "pure" as the goals written on paper. Our History and Political Science Department, for example, was not comfortable writing down that their five-year goal is to increase the number of students in their classes so all the history profs can remain employed. Instead, the goal is: "to serve the needs of each student in higher education to know his past and how his government functions." As altruistic as we all are on paper, the unspoken goal, the benefit for individuals, is the real motivator. This is not to condemn the unspoken goal as wrong; it's simply to suggest it must be understood to be useful.

In light of what we've discussed, what were the results of our planning? One major activity was "unplanning," seeing things anew, stripping away the layers of plans, goals, objectives, regulations, and bureaucratic structures that burden accomplishment.

But activity without planning can be chaos; therefore, planning is essential, especially if we can restrain our proclivity for refinement and detail, and keep long-range plans brief and simple. The aim became what someone has called "A simple compass--that indicates the general direction and allows you to use your own ingenuity in overcoming difficulties...* So much for our "coffee-table-book" plans!

We've learned it's the research that informs planning that should be all-encompassing. Planning is information intensive and requires a tireless pursuit of data on students, the institution, the community, trends, projections. In turn, these data must be converted into information and presented in useful, understandable formats. As information changes, we get out our erasers and adjust our plans, yearly goals, and methods of operating. It's those fixed objectives, the inviolate plans that become hindrances and barriers, and ultimately boring and unheeded.

If we see planning as exerting a conscious, positive influence over the course of the college, then planning is not an attempt to predict the future and devise lock-step plans to meet it. Instead, strategic planning is determining what we have to do today to be ready for an uncertain tomorrow. Peter Drucker has noted that plans deal not with future decisions, but the futurity of present

decisions.

We now know that strategic planning is a vision to be communicated to the college community, a way of coming to grips with exactly what our college is, where it can and should go, and what tasks or trade-offs must be made at this time in order to get there. Our planning offers a loose framework so hundreds of employees and dozens of separate departments can keep moving ahead, around unforeseen obstacles and beyond the stated objectives.

It is precisely when situations are unstable and forecasting most difficult that carefully thought-out directions, flexible enough to adjust to the possible-but-unexpected, are essential. As Peter Drucker says, "the best way to predict the future is to create it." Our goal as planners is to inspire, to help the college choose its future, assist to bring it about, and see to it we stay loose enough to create a changing future. We will need plenty of erasers handy as we remind ourselves that procedures are less important; it's the experience that is worthwhile.

"Plans are nothing. Planning is everything."

Dwight D. Eisenhower

How has strategic planning worked for MCC? Measuring results of strategic planning is difficult. A specific action that relates directly to a recommendation--such as appointing a person to produce a handbook for adjunct faculty by August, 1986--is easy to identify. Much harder to measure are ripple effects, changes in attitude, the release of important new energies, but those are the most important to the points in this paper. Let's, then, look at some of the accomplishments that required innovative problem-solving, easing of rigid structures, and new ways of seeing.

1) Venture capital fund

Convinced we had to assist the academic innovator and risk-taker, the committee recommended a venture capital fund. Initial funding was $450,000 to be used for high-risk ideas that needed a quick start and a minimum of red tape.

2) Entrepreneurial unit

The committee noted a 300% increase in non-credit, business specific programs in the last six months. This placed enormous demands on already strained mainstream operations like management systems, personnel, and space. Requests from business and industry required, with a few days' notice, a completely new way of teaching an aspect of mathematics, foreign language, or electrical circuitry. Our curriculum committee works on a several-year timeframe, not several-day. Also, this increase outstripped management

capacities: budgets prepared 18 months in advance of contractual obligations served as a barrier; existing people and procedures were unaccustomed to unusual funding mechanisms and entrepreneurial projects.

The committee recommended a stand-alone, entrepreneurial unit with flexibility in delivery systems, rewards, and fiscal procedures. The unit, called Corporate Services, is now in operation.

3) Marketing

Based on committee recommendations, the College contracted with outside organizations to carry out market research through surveys and focus groups. As a result, we have hired an advertising agency to assist us in addressing the proper market segments and projecting a favorable college image.

4) Advisement/Retention/Testing

The College will introduce its first testing/placement/advisement program this fall. The committee's recommendations were able to convert years of desultory talk into action.

5) Integration of Planning and Budgeting

For the first time we abandoned incremental budgeting. All budgets, departmental to vice presidential, were clearly based on planning goals.

In addition to these and some sixteen other strategic planning accomplishments, there were additional results. The quality of decisions on important issues tended to improve. Decisions became more goal-oriented, better informed and supported by data, better coordinated and integrated, less parochial. Our sense of direction has become more specific. Decisions are more strategically perceptive. Although we have little power over broad social and economic changes, we are quicker to adapt. We are creating the atmosphere that encourages us to be more innovative, encouraging of initiative, and not only entrepreneurial but intrapreneurial.

*Robert H. Hayes, "Why Strategic Planning Goes Awry," New York Times, April 20, 1986

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